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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyze the cultural literacy of a college of education faculty and compare it to the cultural literacy of undergraduate and graduate students at the same institution. A 100-item instrument, based upon a New York Times book review of "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know" (E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and others, 1987), was developed and administered to 104 faculty, 54 undergraduates, and 82 graduate students. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had a strong association with each item. The study found that the faculty reported that an average of 72 percent of the items elicited a resonance, while student responses ranged from 57 to 62 percent. The most difficult items for the faculty were eminence grise, annus mirabilis, xylem, Danton, jeremiad, and noble gas. Since Hirsch believed that high school graduates should be familiar with nearly all of the terms on the list, the study raises questions about the cultural literacy of college faculty or the expectations of Hirsch. (MDM)

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Cultural Literacy of a College of Education Faculty

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Objective. This study was planned to analyze the cultural literacy of a college of education faculty and to compare it to the cultural literacy of undergraduate and graduate students attending the same institution.

Perspectives. The construct of cultural literacy was coined and popularized by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and his colleagues in a book entitled Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to know (Hirsch, 1987). From the book's dust jacket we learn that cultural literacy refers to "the common knowledge that enables students to make sense of what they read."

Hirsch cited a number of educational researchers (John B. Carroll, Jeanne S. Chall, H. J. Walberg, L. A. Cremin, R. C. Anderson, and R. L. Thorndike) to support a rationale for cultural literacy. The notoriety received by the book was engendered by the infamous "List" publisher as an appendix. This list is a nearly 5000 item sample from a proposed national vocabulary and includes words, dates, quotations, titles and names.

Apparently, the reader does not necessarily need precise identifications and definitions. All that matters is that the item "ring a bell." If the reader can begin with rough or "ball park associations," then he or she can layer on successively more complex and precise meanings.

Despite (or because of) the criticism leveled against Hirsch, a recent search of ERIC or CD-ROM turned up nearly 300 citations. Book stores carry copies of his Cultural Literacy dictionaries.

There has been a long-standing, if modest, research interest in the characteristics of the education professoriat (Borrowman, 1965; Ducharme & Agne, 1982; Ladd, 1979; Mager & Myers, 1983 and Prichard, Fen, and Buxton, 1971). This literature has dealt with prior work experience, types of academic credentials, and social class. To my knowledge there have been no investigations of the cultural literacy of the education professoriat. It is plausible that the relatively low status of schools, colleges, and departments of education is in part attributable to their perceived lack of general cultural knowledge.

Methods and Techniques. An instrument was devised using the 100 items chosen by the editors for a New York Times review of Cultural Literacy. These items included: Luddite, Gresham's Law, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," Danton, and shibboleth. Respondents were instructed to "mark 1 if you have a strong association, not necessarily an exact definition . . .; otherwise mark 2."

Data Sources. The research site was a large, urban, publically supported university, located in a major southeastern city. By permission of the dean, the faculty of the college of education was surveyed at the opening faculty meeting of the academic year. Student responses, graduate

and undergraduate, were gathered from intact classes. The sample sizes were: n = 104 for the faculty; n = 54 for the undergraduate class; and n = 20, n = 24, and n = 38 for the three graduate classes.

Results. The primary data analytic techniques were item analysis and correlation. Overall, the faculty reported that an average of 72% of the items elicited a resonance. Student percentages ranged from 57 to 62%.

Although the total scale means differed somewhat, the correlations between the faculty scores and the student scores were fairly stable (r's ranged from .75 to .87). This suggests that faculty and students tended to find similar items familiar or unfamiliar.

To provide a more detailed analysis the items were subdivided into subscales, most of which were suggested by Hirsch. The faculty outperformed the students, but overall not greatly. For example, on Work History since 1550 (7 items) the faculty average was 48%; the student average was 41%. On Physical Sciences and Math (8 items) the faculty average was 69% and the student average was 65.3%. And on World Literature, Philosophy, and Religion (6 items) the faculty average was 41% and the student average was 34%. The faculty did much better than the students on Biography (11 items) with 75% vs. 56%.

For the faculty the most difficult items were: eminence grise, annus mirabilis, xylem, Danton, jeremiad, and noble gas. Difficulties ranged from 18 - 22%. The easiest items were: gung-ho, Kitty Hawk, leading question, birthday suit, Susan B. Anthony, Immaculate Conception, and fire-side chat. These difficulties ranged from 95-100. In educational measurement, difficulty refers to the proportion or percentage correct.

As an aid to interpreting these data one should consider that Hirsch believes that a high school graduate should find nearly all of the items at least familiar. A review in the March 15, 1982 New York Times Book Review (from which this list was taken) quotes Hirsch as believing:

"A score of 100 is passing . . . and 95 could just be bad luck; 85-95 suggests you may be missing out on something: below 85, there is cause for concern. Below 75, either this quiz is a Procrustean Bed or else Ignorance is Bliss."

Educational Importance. This study has added to our limited knowledge of the education professoriat. Insofar as this sample is representative, the data suggest that the cultural literacy of professors of education is below the level Hirsch expects of high school graduates. One implication is a partial explanation of the relatively low status held by colleges, schools and departments of education. In brief, our counterparts in other disciplines think that we are not broadly read and hence we do not understand the breadth of allusions they use with colleagues.

With respect to the old adage about teaching by precept and example. We may be underemphasing the second. If we want culturally literate (in the broadest and most multicultural sense) high school graduates, perhaps we should model such literacy for our students.

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## CULTURAL LITERACY SURVEY

These 100 items are samples from E. D. Hirsch's recent book, Cultural Literacy. On the Opscan Form mark 1 if you have a strong association, not necessarily an exact definition, for the term, date, quotations, name, etc.; otherwise mark 2.

1. amortization
2. anaerobic
3. annus mirabilis
4. Anthony, Susan B.
5. Appomattox
6. auxiliary verb
7. Babbit
8. basal metabolism
9. birthday suit
10. Bradley, Omar
11. Brown v. Board of Education
12. capacitor
13. Castile
14. Circe
15. Columbia River
16. Congress of Vienna
17. containment, policy of
18. Council of Trent
19. dacha
20. Danton
21. devil can cite Scripture, The
22. Dienbienphu
23. Donner Pass
24. Doric order (of architecture)
25. Douglass, Frederick
26. Dreyfus affair
27. eminence grise
28. ethyl alcohol
29. Farmer, Fanny
30. Fermi, Enrico
31. fireside chat
32. flying buttress
33. Fortuna
34. fourth estate, the
35. Gibbon, Edward
36. Gordian knot, cut the
37. Gresham's law
38. gung-ho
39. hard-wired
40. Hector
41. hypotenuse
42. Hz
43. Immaculate Conception
44. invisible hand
45. I wandered lonely as a cloud
46. jeremiad
47. justification by faith
48. Kelvin, Lord
49. kingdom was lost, For want of a nail the
50. Kitty Hawk
51. leading question
52. Lima
53. Limbo
54. lodestar
55. Luddite
56. Manifest Destiny
57. Marshall, Chief Justice John
58. meiosis
59. monism
60. Mont Blanc
61. motor development
62. negative income tax
63. New Amsterdam
64. noble gas
65. Oak Ridge
66. Ockham's razor
67. Olympian heights
68. Owens, Jesse
69. parity price
70. pearl of great price
71. Pershing, Gen. John (Black Jack)
72. pistil
73. Pooh-Bah
74. prevailing westerlies
75. Quisling
76. reduction (chemistry)
77. salt on a bird's tail
78. Santa Fe Trail
79. Sarajevo
80. shibboleth
81. shout fire in a crowded theater
82. solstice
83. St. Paul's Cathedral
84. Sun King, the
85. Talmud
86. telemetry
87. There is no joy in Mudville
88. thirty pieces of silver
89. Thor
90. tilt at windmills
91. torque
92. vassal
93. Vichy
94. Volstead Act
95. Watt, James
96. white dwarf
97. worship the golden calf
98. xylem
99. yellow peril
100. zero-sum